

## Gender in science

It is October as I write this, but it will be late November or December by the time you read it. Most years I would feel confident writing something about the future that might seem apposite, but I don't feel quite so sure this time. I have no idea how school half term will have been, or how long, or how much time teachers and children will have spent in school under whatever restrictions and guidance are in place across the remainder of the year.

However, some things will remain certain and, as is often the way for these editorials, my children have provided some inspiration for this one. They have started talking about Christmas (and birthday which is only six days prior to Christmas day). They have started to express interest in what they might like as gifts for those two events. They are 6 (soon to be 7) so I don't blame them for being influenced by the advertising in the shops, on the television and all around them. Equally, I don't indulge the conversations.

My son asked to speak with his Papa (maternal granddad) and when he came on the phone he asked if Papa could buy him a telescope for his birthday. As grandparents reserve the right to spoil their grandchildren, after some discussion around the spec of the item, an agreement was reached. My daughter then took over. And she would like 'the Barbie doll that comes with a unicorn and carriage'. I have been in a state of turmoil ever since. I played with such dolls when I was young, but I am so opposed to her doing the same. I have questioned over and over if it really matters at her age – to what extent is she influenced by the female represented by that particular form of plastic?

I decided to have a search on the internet and sure enough found that Mattel (the producers of Barbie) has increased

the range of their dolls. In addition to the plethora of princess options, there is the 'career' series. Barbie can be a pilot, a firefighter, an astronaut, a footballer ... and there are petite versions, a Barbie amputee, Barbie in a wheelchair and a 'curvy' one. I am lucky that I have a daughter who doesn't ask for much; rarely does she identify 'things' she wants. So I am in the position of being about to deny her one of the few things she has asked for because of the way I feel about gender stereotyping and the image this doll perpetuates. I have

read around the research, which suggests there is a detrimental impact on the body image of young girls who have such dolls. I am not convinced that the 'career' range will reverse this. However, I have also read that this view is a little too simplistic, under-represents children's play and assumes that it is a direct representation of their aspirations for adult life. I am still not sure what she will have when she opens her presents.

This personal position is timely. This issue of *Primary Science* is full of challenges to stereotypes and fabulous role models for all children to make us think about what we

are teaching and how we are teaching it. It has been a pleasure to see how willing people have been to write and contribute to this issue. I would like to offer particular thanks to Dr Jess Wade who is our 'In conversation with...' subject, following the interview with Professor Sir John Holman in the last issue. Perhaps this issue is also timely in other ways. 2021 is nearly upon us and we have no idea what it will bring. We can, however, make positive decisions to challenge ourselves, and the curriculum, to draw upon examples of scientists who reflect real life and the achievements of all scientists out there.

**Leigh Hoath**

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